

CHRISTIAN UNION:

A Sermon

BY

REV. JAMES PRATT,

Rector of the Church of the Covenant,

PHILADELPHIA.

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PHILADELPHIA, OCTOBER 10th, 1859.

REV. JAMES PRATT,

REV. AND DEAR SIR:—Highly approving of the sentiments expressed in your sermon on “Christian Union,” preached in the Church of the Covenant, on Sunday morning last, and believing that a wider dissemination of them, would be promotive of much good, we would respectfully request a copy of it, for publication.

Yours very truly,

J. WHETHAM,

CH. G. SOWER,

JOHN TANGUY, JR.,

SAM’L SIMES,

ALEX. KIRKPATRICK,

JAMES A. KIRKPATRICK,

JOHN P. RHOADS,

PAUL G. OLIVER.

DEAR BRETHREN:—Your kind note, asking the sermon preached last Sunday morning for publication, is before me. I am thoroughly conscious that the sermon contains nothing new, and the thought would never have occurred to me that it was worthy of publication. But I yield to your judgment, and shall be very happy, if, in any degree, it may contribute to the furtherance of that blessed union of Christ’s disciples for which our Church teaches us to pray.

Believe me, dear Brethren,

Most truly yours,

J. PRATT.

PHILADELPHIA, OCTOBER 11th, 1859.

Sermon.

Galatians iii. 28.—“For ye are all one in Christ Jesus.”

WHEN the multitude of the heavenly host joined the messenger angels, as they hung over the plains of Bethlehem, this was the burden of their song, “On earth peace, good will to men.” And well were such words chosen to usher in the Prince of Peace, as he came to save the lost.

The system which this mighty Prince established is pre-eminently peaceful in its character and in all its fruits. It avails nothing to say that thousands have been slain—tens of thousands cruelly tortured to the death, in the name of Christianity, for to all such objections there is the ever ready answer: This was the work of fiend-like men who “stole the livery of heaven to serve the Devil in.” The cause of Christ has no more responsibility in reference to such infamous deeds, than God has in the fearful sins of rebellious men. The argument is utterly worthless, for even the most determined opposer—the boldest railer against the Gospel, dare not affirm when you press him closely, that he believes these evils to have sprung legitimately from the

system which Christ taught. The most he ventures to say is, that the Gospel gave occasion for them,—that its introduction stirred up the evil passions of those who opposed it, until they were ready for any deed of cruelty. Then under pretence of defending the true faith, they murdered the sons of God who had hid his word in their hearts. That these results have followed, we have no wish to deny. Nay, even Christ himself declared that such consequences *should* follow, when he said “I came not to send peace on earth, but a sword.” “The children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death.” But did any reasonable man ever think of bringing this as an objection to the Gospel? Surely not! Charge this then to the sinfulness of the human heart, not to the Gospel, which seeks to take away that sin.

We return then to say, that super-eminently the religion of the Cross is calculated to produce peace between God and man, and also between man and man. And this we hold to be perfectly manifest in every instance where the Gospel exerts its power. Man in his natural state is at enmity with God—his heart “is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be” until the current of its affections is changed. It has a law of its own in which it delights, and inasmuch as this law is in direct violation of the divine law, at least in its main features, nothing but enmity towards the Divine Lawgiver can result. But now, let the gospel exert its power upon that heart, and the enmity dies. Let the purifying influences of divine grace be spread abroad through the affections, and instantly they rise from the sinful things of time and sense, and cluster round the throne of God. Instead of standing afar off and looking with a

clouded brow towards the Deity, as though, in some way, he interrupted the joys of human life, there is an eager anxiety to draw near, and still nearer his throne. Lovingly the soul seeks his presence, and finds its chiefest joy in the smile of that reconciled countenance. There is no enmity now; that has been slain, that has been nailed to the Cross of God's dear Son, and, as a child beloved, the penitent believer cries "Abba, Father." And this is all the work of the Gospel, sanctified by the Sanctifier. No human power can work this change, any more than the leopard can change his spots, or the Ethiopian his skin. Thousands have tried. Restless and wretched, they have sought unaided, to cast away their opposition and to love the God in whose hands they felt themselves to rest, but in this effort they have failed. Yea, though God desires their reconciliation and love, yet both must be gained in his own appointed way through Jesus Christ.

And as the gospel brings man thus into a state of peace with God, so does it make him peaceful in all his relations with his fellow men. See this exemplified in every case of genuine conversion from sin to holiness. See it in every community where the spirit of the gospel is allowed free course. Infidelity itself, admits as much as this; granting freely that a purer morality was never taught than that which is found in the gospel, and there *can* be no doubt but that the gospel is adapted in an eminent degree, to reconcile or sink the differences which so often exist, between individuals and classes of individuals in society. What, for example, can more effectually accomplish this, than such teaching as this before us: "Ye are all one," and "all

one in Christ Jesus," the very soul of peace and love. Suppose this truth to work its way into the hearts of all his disciples, would the world be tormented as it is now, with the envyings and strifes, and divisions of those who still call themselves disciples? No indeed, my brethren, and the only reason why such scenes are presented to day is, that this truth has not been thoroughly learned. We are too fond of talking of the points of difference between ourselves and christians around us, and then of magnifying those differences, until we work ourselves up to the conviction that there can be no sympathy, when we differ in so many respects. But beloved, there *is* such a *thing* as ONENESS among the disciples of Jesus Christ; and if we have not learned the fact, if we have never yet taken in a truth so plainly written on the sacred page, it is high time we studied our own hearts and the word of God more diligently. There is however, another hindrance to this oneness, beside that of differences of opinion, and that is, the innate selfishness of our hearts, and this hindrance may, and very often does, exist to such a formidable extent, as to prevent the christian union of those in the same church and congregation. Thoughtful of ourselves alone, of our own joys and cares, we travel on, regardless of the condition of those around us. This is an evil, and it is an evil which ought to be corrected, and which *would* be corrected if we rightly understood and carefully strove to conform our lives to the really precious truth before us in the text.

May it be profitable to us then to inquire—

1st. In what respects we are one with all the disciples of Christ around us, whatever may be their name or peculiarities.

2d. What are some of the duties growing out of this relation among those of the same communion.

The intimate spiritual union existing among those who believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, is declared in many places in the New Testament with the greatest plainness of expression and force of metaphor. Thus, for example, in Christ's intercessory prayer, "Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they all may *be one* as we are." So also as an example of the force of metaphorical expression, "I am the vine, ye are the branches." Can any thing be plainer? But wherein does this union—this oneness consist?

1. In the fact that we have all ONE SAVIOUR. There is one, and but one vine, however many may be the branches, and all these branches must draw their support from the one vine, "so we being many are one body in Christ." Every eye is directed to him as the great Captain of our salvation,—from his mouth proceed the laws which govern us in all our conflicts with the powers of sin, and in all our struggles to gain the kingdom of heaven. There never comes a thought of glorious rest, which has not linked with it a thought of Christ as "the way." Literally, never does a glowing picture of heaven present itself to the eye of the soul, which has not Christ as the centre point of its attraction and glory; and in all this *we as a people* are not peculiar, nor are our next door neighbors. It is a peculiarity which belongs to Christians as such; it is the distinguishing mark of discipleship—not of denomination. We, as members of this church, may believe that in many respects our advantages for growing in grace are superior to those enjoyed by others; we may rejoice in our form of

worship, in our scriptural liturgy, and in all the abundant provisions of God's house, for in many of these things we *are* a peculiar people; but in whatsoever relates to Christ as a Saviour of those who trust in him, we stand upon the same ground with our brethren around us; with an earnestness equal to our own, with a faith as strong as our own, and with a grasp as firm as our own, they cling to the cross as the world's only hope. In *this* we are one. The great world around us is catching at straws floating uncertainly on time's current, is talking vainly of God's free mercy, or of man's native excellency, or of man's meritorious works, and thus robbing Christ of his glory; but the disciples, whether of Paul or of Apollos, are looking unto Jesus, and with one heart confessing, that he is "the author and finisher" of the only faith, by which immortal souls may be saved.

Now we do by no means assert, that the things in which these disciples differ, are matters of no importance; in our honest hearts we believe some of them to be of comparatively great importance, and being sincere in our attachment to our own peculiarities, and firm in our convictions, that in whatsoever we are peculiar, we are more nearly conformed to the Divine pattern, where a pattern has been given, and where it has not, that the peculiarities lie in such things as are promotive of a vigorous spiritual life. Being, as we said, honest and firm in these convictions, we could wish with all our hearts, that those who differ from us, could see eye to eye with us, and with hands and hearts labor with us for the extension of the Redeemer's kingdom. But having said this, are we not compelled to say—compelled by the majesty of truth to say—that our agreement in this great article of faith, *Christ all and in all to the*

soul, makes us *one*, notwithstanding our differences upon minor points? Oh, my brethren, how many of those things which now stand as mountain barriers between disciples, will be swept away by the wing of that angel who shall stand on earth and sea, and declare that time shall be no longer? If a sense of shame ever enters the courts of heaven, will it not visit us, when we remember the heart-burnings of earth, because of trifling differences among the friends of Christ! What if some branches spring from the vine upon the one side, and some upon the other—some higher up, and some lower down—all have their life from the vine. What if you cling to Christ holding him by his *right* hand, and another hold just as firmly by his *left*, while still another, with deeper humility perhaps, holds fast by the hem of his garment. Can you, upon the right hand, despise him upon the left, or either of you look contemptuously down upon him who clings to the hem of his robe! Oh, let us remember that of old, virtue flowed forth to the humble soul, who dared do no more than touch that hem, with living faith.

2. But again, we are *one* in THE ROBE OF RIGHTEOUSNESS, which covers us. Upon this point we cannot dwell; it is plain, and demands but few words. The conversion of a soul is a work, in itself, in its nature, entirely independent of external circumstances; it may be aided, or it may be hindered by those circumstances, but the change of heart is the same thing here or there; and so also is the putting on of the righteousness of Christ, the same act in whatever latitude, under whatever form of church government, the thing may be done. There is *one* wardrobe, and but one, so that whether a soul be born again in heathen lands, or

in the midst of Christian influences—in one religious congregation or another, it must come to this *one* wardrobe before it can be clothed. And my brethren, it may do all Christian hearts good to stand for a while beside this one resort, and see men coming from the north and from the south, from the east and from the west, and with humble devotion robing themselves for the marriage supper of the Lamb. It may be, that standing there, we should understand better than ever before, what St. Paul means, when he says, “For as many of you as have been baptised into Christ, have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female, for ye *are all one in Christ Jesus* ;” and in another place, “There is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcision nor uncircumcision, Barbarian, Scythian, bond nor free, but Christ is *all*, and in *all*.” What a mighty change would be wrought in the christian world, if these two passages were truly received and truly believed, and truly made the basis of thought and action among the friends of Jesus Christ ; who does not believe—who does not know—that the cause of Christ would receive a glorious impulse from the united host.

3. We must pass, however, to notice as briefly, that the friends of Christ are *one* IN THEIR HOPE OF HEAVEN. There remaineth therefore *a rest* for the people of God,—*a rest*. We never read of *many* cities of God—of *many* houses “not made with hands, eternal in the heavens ;” but of *one* city, of *one* house. All then are hastening to one glorious home, and expecting to dwell together throughout an endless eternity. In that upper house, the names by which we now designate the various portions of the household of

faith will be lost, and the glorified will be known simply as SAINTS. Such thoughts as these do sometimes force themselves upon the minds of even the most belligerent in the militant church, and they serve to weaken somewhat their sword arm, and destroy the force of the blows which they inflict upon those around them. Would to God their potency were greater and more continuous, for how unwise, not to speak of its wickedness, how *unwise* it is for a little flock, sorely beset,—for a small company of travellers in a strange country, surrounded by dangers of every description, all striving to reach the same point in a distant land, nay to enter as brethren the same house in that distant land, how unwise for such to fall out by the way—to magnify trifles into matters of importance, and then for these trifles thus magnified, to divide, and establish laws of non-intercourse between the divisions. Surely, one would say the pressure of danger round about ought to be sufficient to keep them together; if not, certainly the prospect of meeting at the last and dwelling together through lengthened ages should supply what the former consideration lacks. Merging trifles which ought to be unconsidered, and looking kindly on differences which are held to be important, the disciples of Jesus Christ should move on fraternally towards their Father's house above.

But now, having seen somewhat of our oneness with Christians round about us, and of the duties which grow out of that intimate relation, we wish to spend a remaining moment in considering our relative duties as members of the same church, and hence, in a peculiar sense, “*one* in Christ Jesus.” When persons are thus drawn together by their agreement in reference to those peculiarities in which one

body of Christians differs from another body, and when by solemn covenant, they stand united in the presence of God and men, *then*, in a very strong sense of the term, they constitute but one family ; the order and discipline adopted is only to be considered as a system for the better *regulation* of the family ; the interest of each separate individual becomes the interest of all ;

“ Their fears, their hopes, their aims are one,
Their comforts, and their cares.”

Now if this be so, then we hold it to be most manifestly the duty of those thus united, to cultivate each other's acquaintance, that they may thus know each other's condition and wants. United in spiritual bonds,—dwelling in the same house of God,—joining in the same acts of devotion,—prayers and praises mingling in their ascent to the throne of God,—eating and drinking the same spiritual food, and at the same table,—is it not a marvellous thing that those who are thus closely *one*, should be actually strangers to each other? Brothers in Christ, kneeling side by side at the altar of God, and yet not know each other! This ought not so to be. In the primitive church, when fearful dangers hemmed the disciples round, it surely was not so. They took sweet counsel together and walked to the house of God in company. There was a depth of interest, a fervor of love felt then, which in these latter days has vastly decreased, but which it should be our earnest endeavor to restore. By kindly, social intercourse, and especially by manifesting a spirit of sympathy in the hour of sickness or affliction of any kind, we may knit our *hearts* together as the hearts of one wide family. There is, we know, an intrusive friendship ; we have no word of commendation for *that*, nor do we deem

the danger from that quarter to be very imminent; there is much greater danger that we shall stand nicely upon laws of etiquette, and hold ourselves aloof from each other with some one of these unfulfilled duties lying between us. There is much greater danger that, wrapped up in our own cares and toils, we shall neglect the duties we plainly owe to other members of the family of Christ. This is undoubtedly the tendency of things when the fire of love burns low on the altar of the Christian heart. Let the spirit of the Master descend,—let the love of Christ be shed abroad in these cold hearts of ours, and what a change is immediately produced in the matter of which we are speaking. Then all hearts run together, and become as the heart of one man; we realize the oneness of our work, and faith, and hope. As in apostolic days, we are disposed to call nothing that our brethren need our own; we give them our hearts' love, and with it, whatever else we can bestow. Why may it not be so now? Why *should* it not be so now? Those early Christians were no more one in Christ Jesus than we are; there were no greater obligations laid upon them to be kindly affectioned one toward another, than have been laid upon us. True, the press of danger from without seemed, though it was not, greater than it is now; for although their danger was more apparent, it was not a particle more real than ours; so that there was no greater necessity for union than exists here and at this very hour.

Let me then, in conclusion, my brethren, urge upon you, in the first place, the solemn Christian duty of cultivating a spirit of loving kindness towards all those who give you the evidence that they love the Lord Jesus Christ. Maintain we may—nay, must—whatever we deem essential to the

well-being of a well ordered church of Christ ; let us cherish in our inner hearts the church we love, truthfully saying,

“Beyond my highest joy,
I prize her heavenly ways,
Her sweet communion, solemn vows,
Her hymns of love and praise.”

But while we do all this with fervor and with firmness, let us still remember, as we look around upon our fellow-disciples, the truth taught us in the text, “Ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Never let us forget that far above all minor differences, this glorious truth towers even to the heavens, fixing the eyes of all beholders, and giving them new assurance that the Gospel is true. And in the second place, let me earnestly commend to your notice the practical every-day duties which spring from our relations as members of the same communion. Let us not look upon our own things simply, but also on the things of others. Let us cherish that true unity of the spirit which the Gospel so highly commends, and which contributes in so eminent a degree to the happiness and prosperity of any people among whom it is found. Laboring thus, hand joined in hand, heart linked to heart ;—in a word, and that the word of the text ; laboring thus *as one* in Christ Jesus, we shall surely see the work of the Lord prospering in our hands. Men will say of us, “we will go with you, for God is with you ;” and when our work is ended we may enter that glorious rest,

“Where the saints of all ages in harmony meet,
Their Saviour and brethren transported to greet,
Where the anthems of rapture unceasingly roll,
And the smile of the Lord is the feast of the soul.”